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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001225

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SUBJECT: THE BURMESE REGIME'S "SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT" WITH THAILAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 6164

1B. RANGOON 512 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A recent exchange of top military visits between Burma and Thailand indicates improving relations between the SPDC and the Royal Thai Armed Forces and is a sign that many wounds have healed since the two armies squared off during a series of deadly border skirmishes in mid-2002. However, SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe has apparently failed to respond to multiple requests from Thai Prime Minister Thaksin to meet in Rangoon, a likely indication that the regime's new found comfort zone with the Thai does not extend from the uniforms to the suits. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On the heels of Burmese Joint Chief of Staff General Thura Shwe Mann's August 24-26 visit to Bangkok (reftel), Thailand's top military brass made recent, successive visits to Rangoon to meet with senior SPDC officials. From August 31 to September 1 Royal Thai Army Commander in Chief General Chaisit Shinawatra made a two-day visit to Rangoon. Just over a week later, September 10-11, Supreme Commander General Somdhat Attanand made an almost identical high-profile visit. Gen Chaisit will replace Gen Somdhat as Supreme Commander on October 1.

¶3. (C) Each Thai general had substantive meetings with the SPDC's top two leaders, Senior General Than Shwe and Vice Senior General Maung Aye. According to Thai Embassy political counselor Kallayana Vipattipumiprates, who attended all of the meetings, General Chaisit gave Than Shwe assurances that his forces would not allow insurgents to use Thai territory as a base "to disrupt" neighboring countries and that he was confident his successor, deputy CINC General Pravit Kongswan, would adhere to the same policy. Although the two generals did not discuss ongoing talks between the SPDC and the Karen National Union (KNU), Than Shwe expressed an appreciation for the role Thai forces had played in "controlling" the border environment, observing that a more secure border would lead to mutually beneficial development.

¶4. (C) According to Kallayana, General Chaisit's meeting with Maung Aye revealed interesting commentary from the Burmese Army chief. Maung Aye said that "it is time we opened our hearts to those who seek a peaceful and democratic" Burma and he expressed the SPDC's desire to complete the regime's road map as soon as possible. It had not been easy negotiating with the ethnic cease-fire groups, he said, but the GOB had achieved progress, including with the KNU. Maung Aye repeated the word "democracy" several times, said Kallayana, but qualified his remarks by adding that Burma "seeks a version of democracy that is acceptable to the (Burmese) people and to the international community," a process that "might take longer than expected and therefore we are not certain about a timeline for the road map."

¶5. (C) The SPDC accorded the same red-carpet treatment to General Somdhat Attanand's follow-on visit, including meetings with top SPDC authorities, an official dinner for the "Thai goodwill delegation," and full coverage by state-run media. SPDC Chairman Than Shwe, according to the Thai political counselor, told Somdhat he wanted to continue "close relations" between the Burmese and Thai militaries and hoped there would be no disruption after the Supreme Commander retires in October. At the official dinner on September 10, host Vice Senior General Maung Aye joked to his guests about his own retirement, saying he was "an old man," and identified JCS Shwe Mann, Secretary 1 Lt Gen Soe Win, and Secretary 2 Lt Gen Thein Sein as "my replacements."

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¶6. (C) The Thai Minister of Defense is also expected to make a visit to Rangoon in the coming months. However, the SPDC has failed to respond to several requests by Prime Minister Thaksin to meet with Senior General Than Shwe. The PM has made at least two official requests and the Burmese have to date ignored the issue. According to Kallayana, the PM is keen to advance a plan involving Thai support for the development of Dawei, a southern Burmese port city near the

Thai border, and other bilateral issues. The RTG, he said, views PM Khin Nyunt as "hamstrung" by the less flexible Than Shwe and consequently Thaksin wants to "go to the top" and deal directly with the SPDC Chairman.

17. (C) Comment: The SPDC generals take great delight in hosting visitors such as the Thai military leadership: the discussions focus on mutual border issues; their guests are polite and avoid raising sensitive political issues; and in the process the Burmese relish a perceived boost in their legitimacy. However, the SPDC's apparent dismissal of PM Thaksin's quiet entreaties is puzzling, particularly given Thaksin's willingness to create a "soft" international venue (the "Bangkok Process") for the Burmese regime to pitch their road map. The Thai political counselor says the RTG is surprised by the snub and he opines that Than Shwe is keen to avoid Thaksin because the SPDC suspects ("with good reason") that the Thai will raise the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and other "unpleasant" political issues. End Comment.

18. (U) This message has been coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
Martinez